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Review: Jeffrey T. Grabill. *Writing Community Change: Designing Technologies for Citizen Action*. (Hampton Press, 2007)

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This book—slim in size but big on ideas—won the 2010 *Reflections* Civic Scholarship Outstanding Book Award. The subtitle might scare away those who aren't computer and composition enthusiasts, but that would be a shame because Jeffrey Grabill, while certainly invested in emerging technology, is making a case—and a convincing one—about how we should reconceptualize several elements of how community writing is practiced, studied and taught, in high-tech environments or not.

Grabill's arguments hinge on two terms that don't make it into the book's title: *invention* and *infrastructure*. He treats *invention* in the spirit of that term in rhetoric—as a diverse set of strategies for surveying the rhetorical situation, exploring what is possible, assessing the resources for persuasion, initiating discourse, and generating arguments. But he also brings invention into the 21st century by arguing that contemporary invention (and writing) cannot be decoupled from the tools we use to do knowledge work: computers, software, the Internet, databases (from federal census data to local survey data sitting on the hard drives of advocacy organizations), government agencies (city, state, federal), organizations (community groups, corporations, universities), libraries, experts of all sorts, research practices, reading habits, public meetings—the myriad things we may acknowledge as humming in the background of community writing but that Grabill



urges us to see *as* writing. He argues that, “writing (and) technologies are infrastructure” (56). The work of citizenship, public deliberation, and community change is knowledge work, and that knowledge work, for Grabill, is less about how individual writers compose texts than about how information infrastructures frame what is possible.

Grabill ramps up to such claims by introducing strands of scholarship that will be unfamiliar to many in composition studies—even many in computers and composition—such “community informatics,” the study of the civic uses of technology. He also makes occasional forays into political science and communication studies. Yet just as he seems in danger of wandering too far afield, he returns the conversation to rhetoric. Among the more memorable parts of his take on rhetoric is his campaign for *metis*, a term he recuperates from classical rhetoric to affirm the cunning, pragmatic, usually underappreciated intelligence exhibited by local citizens as they work through problems.

The energy of the book picks up as Grabill details two action research case studies. One, “Harbor,” focuses on distributed rhetorical activity across and within several organizations—government agencies, advocacy groups, neighborhood associations, scientific researchers, and a team of technical communicators (which includes Grabill)—as they all work on a complex environmental and public health problem. The other, “Capital Area Community Information,” describes a design project that aims to make local government data more accessible to citizens and community groups through web-based interfaces. The “Capital Area” case presents a kind of usability challenge often faced by technical communicators (even if rarely studied in a community context); the “Harbor” study proves more interesting because it involves more stakeholders in more conflict using more diverse genres. Grabill maps the dynamics of research, advocacy, protest, and negotiation among the various players in “Harbor” and discovers that only a small part of those processes involve the kinds of single-authored documents most often studied and valorized by rhetoricians



and writing researchers. He reminds us that some genres, like the public meeting, merit just as much attention as the written genres, and that some processes, like the distributed reading habits of women in a neighborhood who are researching the science of pollution, merit just as much attention as traditional composing processes. These are part of the infrastructure of public deliberation and thus forms of “writing” that merit our attention.

In his final chapter Grabill turns his attention to university writing programs, where he asks, “How well do we prepare students for their lives as knowledge workers and writers?” Given the earlier chapters, it is no surprise that he finds the typical curriculum wanting. He urges us to pay more attention to how organizations and communities—not individuals or even project teams—read, invent, write and persuade; he also wants us to focus more on how public deliberation and community change actually take place. This chapter is intriguing and ultimately convincing but many readers will wonder why so little of the related scholarship on community literacy, service-learning, and community-engaged writing programs is cited. A somewhat prickly surprise in this final chapter is Grabill’s contention that his vision of writing is “largely incompatible with the existing institutional model of the writing program in English” (124). Still, he’s right that few English Departments would be willing to take up his ambitious vision of community writing and carry it through.

A good scholarly monograph delivers at least one key term that becomes immediately useful, if not indispensable. While some may think databases beyond their technical ken, and some may find aspects of infrastructure boring (as Grabill readily admits), this book makes it almost impossible to ignore any longer the importance of infrastructure to—and as—writing.